

Book Reviews

Andy Mitchell, *First Elevens: The Birth of International Football and the Men Who Made it Happen* (Scotland: Andy Mitchell Media, 2012). Pp. 155. £9.99 (pb). ISBN 978-1-47520-684-5

Passionate about sports history, Andy Mitchell is the author of several acclaimed works on Scottish football and it is no surprise that in this recent work, *First Elevens*, he presents the story of the origin of international football in absorbing, well-crafted prose, suitable for both academic historians and wider sports fans alike.

In the first chapter, Mitchell documents the circumstances that led up to football's first of five unofficial international matches, when England took on Scotland at Kennington Oval, on 5 March 1870. He describes the 'shambles' (p. 7) that was football in the 1860s, with its myriad variations of rules that had to be agreed pre-match, and puts the game's early development into the context of other sports, most notably rugby football and cricket. The wider social context of sport is examined, such as the impact of geography and access to affordable travel that rendered sport a largely local affair, and the influence of public schools on the sporting landscape. The formation and expansion of the Football Association and the importance of county matches are all depicted in a graceful opening chapter that cannot fail to set the scene for those most uninformed about the origins of the association game.

Chapter 2 details that first unofficial international, and how London-based posh boys and parliamentarians, with the odd misfit son of a property auctioneer, came together under the banners of England and Scotland. Mitchell humorously discusses the very real problem of the Scottish players' credentials and how the match, which resulted in a one all draw after a last-minute England equalizer, '[set] the tone of anguish for future generations of the Tartan Army' (p. 19).

Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate the FA's problem of developing links between itself and Scottish football clubs, and the efforts made in making the northern team more substantially Scottish for the second and third unofficial internationals. The chapters also reference the important domestic games that took place between London and Sheffield, bringing together the variants of football in three seasonal matches, and their impact on the development of the England side for the remaining four unofficial internationals. There is explanation of how the FA's efforts made rugby union stalwarts fear for their code's future, and how the subsequent formation of the RFU and its own staging of the first official rugby international in 1871 loomed large over the association game.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the first full international, staged at the West of Scotland Cricket Ground on 30 November 1872, a thrilling game that ended in a scoreless draw. There are details that will interest the more technically minded football enthusiasts, such as how the English played a more individualistic game 'which required a strong physical presence' (p. 54), with players preferring to dribble the ball alone and be 'backed up' by their team mates. This was in contrast with the combination style of play that the Scottish side inherited from Queen's Park, whereby the ball was passed between them in a display of teamwork that was 'the most effective way of playing the game' (p. 54). Throughout the book, when such details appear they do not alienate the layman reader, but instead add rich flavour and aid understanding of how diverse football was throughout Great Britain.

Chapter 6 marks the beginning of what could be deemed the second part of this book, as it is the first of three chapters that take a closer look at the men who were instrumental in the administration, organization and playing of the events depicted in the first five chapters. It is in these three chapters, in the telling of the human stories that Mitchell's painstaking research shines. The reader learns the fates of the men who left for foreign shores, their successes and failures, their sometimes lonely deaths, their legacies and their influence in their professional fields. In chapter 7, 'Good Sports and Bad Sorts', the grizzly, murderous consequences of a possible psychotic disorder and the non-standard use of poultry as an offensive weapon of domestic violence are juxtaposed with some more sedate and positive life stories from those who went into the clergy or made further strides in the making of modern football. Mitchell answers Juliet's much pondered question as to what's in a name as he documents the identity problems of those who changed their names for love, money or no discernible reason in chapter 8, which will no doubt have every historian who has ever played Sherlock in search of a historical subject crying out in sympathy as they recognize the efforts to which the author had to go through to get to the heart of his subjects.

Then, in case the reader is not quite as impressed by this as they ought to be, chapters 9 and 10 offer the biographies of 115 men who were involved in the birth of international football. The 75 football and 40 rugby biographies include birth, death, marital, professional and sporting details that will no doubt be used as a valuable reference source by football scholars in years to come. For this final triumph of scholarly endeavour, Mitchell, I take my deerstalker hat off to you!

It is very hard to find fault with this book. Mitchell expertly handles a wide variety of sources, and by inserting newspaper reports of the games that give the reader a real sense of active spectatorship on the sidelines. There are a few quotations where references are missing, but this is a minor quibble. The information within this work is significant and incredibly well-researched, and the prose is superbly written, accessible and engaging. The result is that *First Elevens* is a passionate, fascinating portrayal of the origins of international football.

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